

Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers

*Rafi uz Zaman Khan*¹

The underlying sources of tension between India and Pakistan remain unresolved. A severe crisis could lead to military conflict, and any conflict has the potential to escalate. With the nuclearization of South Asia, the prospect of such escalation assumes horrific significance, since conflict remains unpredictable and may not necessarily remain at the conventional level. The concepts of “limited war” and “preemption” are fraught with danger and may not be applicable in South Asia.

The Kashmir dispute remains the *raison d’etre* for hostility between India and Pakistan. Having fought three conventional wars and one limited war in the past, the level of animosity remains high. Bilateral efforts, in the form of various confidence-building measures (CBMs) and nuclear risk reduction measures (NRRMs), have not ushered in a lasting peace to South Asia. These measures have failed due to the absence of trust, strong political will to resolve the Kashmir dispute, and dispute resolution mechanisms, monitoring, and enforcement. The presence of nuclear weapons makes a military solution to the Kashmir dispute unlikely. The longer India and Pakistan remain estranged, the more distrust builds and the more both sides expect the worst from each other. Conditions for stable deterrence are absent, and an accident or miscalculation during a crisis has become increasingly possible. As both nations struggle to adapt to the “stability-instability paradox,”² should they be left alone at the nuclear brink?

There is ample evidence of the need for concrete arrangements to build trust and prevent misperceptions. In addition to steps to resolve the Kashmir dispute—without which confidence-building or nuclear risk reduction measures are unlikely to succeed—it is imperative for the India and Pakistan to establish nuclear risk reduction centers (NRRCs).

Nuclear risk reduction centers should be dedicated for official communication and the rapid exchange of relevant information. They can be used as a central message center for all CBM and NRRM notifications. The proper utilization of NRRCs could prevent unintended signals from leading to a crisis or inadvertent nuclear escalation. The centers may also facilitate the identification, negotiation, and implementation of additional institutional and procedural arrangements, as well as technical measures intended to reduce nuclear risks. NRRCs could provide the means of instantaneous communication among technical experts in the event of a tragic incident or unusual event. While taking concurrent measures for conflict resolution at the political level, both countries could immediately negotiate measures to establish NRRCs, which would symbolize the commitment of the two governments of responsible nuclear stewardship. NRRCs may not only help consolidate measures for the implementation of existing CBMs and NRRMs, they may also help build the trust and confidence that is essential to conflict resolution. Functioning under an already negotiated, preformatted system to exchange

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the policy viewpoints or opinion of the Government of Pakistan, the Pakistan Army or the Strategic Plans Division.

notifications, the NRRCs would not involve any kind of voice communication for crisis resolution, which might transmit misleading or unintended signals. By design, the NRRCs would not substitute for political or diplomatic means of communication.

THE NEED FOR NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION CENTERS

Existing confidence-building measures and nuclear risk reduction measures have failed to achieve their desired objectives because they lack verification and enforcement mechanisms, and because they are disconnected from dispute resolution. As Michael Krepon has observed, India and Pakistan have used CBMs more as “competition-building measures than as confidence-building measures.”³ “Most of the CBM proposals,” he argues, “have instead been designed to capture the political high ground, not to solve problems.”⁴ “The juridical status of CBMs as ‘politically binding’—rather than legally binding—documents helps afford India and Pakistan the latitude to skirt proper implementation.”⁵

During critical periods of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, CBMs have been either ineffective or absent. Michael Krepon describes the three stages of the CBM process as “conflict avoidance measures, confidence building measures and strengthening the peace.”⁶ Pakistan and India have not yet moved beyond the first stage of the CBM process. Dr. Maleeha Lodhi notes that:

... CBMs cannot stand-alone and can only work in a broader context. The presumption of priority for CBMs is that underlying problems are not resolvable, and therefore, by freezing the status quo, CBMs can somehow reduce tension and avert the danger of war.... Meant to be a step towards conflict resolution, they can often be used as a substitute. They have frequently been pursued in South Asia under external prodding or pressure and at the expense of problem solving.⁷

Bilateral initiatives in the absence of conflict resolution are not effective in South Asia. Substantive dialogue on the resolution of Kashmir, is necessary for progress to be achieved on other fronts.⁸ Until positive measures for conflict resolution and new initiatives for the prevention of escalation and nuclear risk reduction are negotiated and implemented, nuclear risk reduction in South Asia will remain elusive.

Since the Kashmir issue may take several years to resolve, the establishment of NRRCs should not be delayed until a settlement is reached. The successful functioning of the NRRCs depends, however, on concurrent measures towards a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. The creation and proper function of NRRCs could help create a “virtuous circle” of building bilateral trust and confidence. If the people of

² See Michael Krepon and Chris Gagné (eds.), *The Stability-Instability Paradox: Nuclear Weapons and Brinkmanship in South Asia* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, June 2001).

³ Krepon, et al., *Global Confidence Building: New Tools for Troubled Regions* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.178.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁶ Michael Krepon, “Conflict Avoidance, Confidence Building and Peacemaking” in *A Handbook of Confidence Building Measures for Regional Security*, 3rd Ed. (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 1998), p. 2.

⁷ Dr Maleeha Lodhi, “Nuclear Risk Reduction and Conflict Resolution in South Asia,” *The News* (Islamabad), November 28, 1998.

⁸ Mr. Inam ul Haq, former foreign secretary of Pakistan, in a statement at the Conference on Disarmament at Geneva on January 25, 2001 has proffered a three-tiered comprehensive peace and security framework that includes simultaneous conflict resolution dialogue, a regional strategic restraint regime, and regional cooperation in economic, trade and social revival between the two

India, Pakistan, and Kashmir are convinced of the sincerity of governments and reassured by the progress of their dialogue on Kashmir, dangerous practices and the conviction for armed struggle are likely to wane.

Objectives of Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers

The concept of a nuclear risk reduction center originated in a working group organized by Senators Sam Nunn and John Warner. The U.S. Nuclear Risk Reduction Center is a unique government entity located in and staffed by the State Department. The U.S. NRRC and its Russian (then-Soviet) counterpart were formally established at a signing ceremony in Washington, DC on September 15, 1987.

Although used primarily for the exchange of notifications under existing bilateral and multilateral treaties, the NRRC has periodically proved its use in other areas as well. In January 1991, “goodwill” notifications were used to exchange information on the re-entry of the Salyut 7 space station. Later that same year the NRRCs served as a means of emergency communications during a major fire in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. In the last 14 years, eleven such “goodwill” messages have been exchanged.

From the first message sent in April 1988, the NRRC has served as a dependable means of exchanging information. It is integral to arms control treaty implementation, and meets communications requirements for almost twenty arms control treaties and agreements with over fifty countries in six different languages. Presently, 153 different types of notifications are being exchanged annually in accordance with various treaties.⁹

The purposes behind the establishment of NRRCs during the Cold War were as follows:

- To facilitate negotiation and implementation of additional institutional and procedural arrangements, as well as technical measures intended to reduce nuclear risks;
- To create a buffer around nuclear risk prevention measures and to protect them from the vicissitudes of U.S.-Soviet relations;
- To provide more latitude to national leaders during crises;
- To provide a means of instantaneous communications among technical experts in the event of unusual contingencies;
- To provide a mechanism for training skilled interagency crisis teams;
- To reassure the publics in both nations, and in third countries, that the two great powers were acting to reduce the risk of nuclear war.¹⁰

These objectives are also pertinent to the establishment of NRRCs in India and Pakistan. Three broad purposes might be served in a South Asian context:

1. To serve as a central clearinghouse for data exchanges and notifications of existing agreements and to formalize the provision of information in a transparent manner.

neighbors. See Feroz Hassan Khan, “Navigating the Crossroads”, *The Monitor* [Center for International Trade and Security, University of Georgia] Vol. 7, No. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 10–14.

⁹ Barry M. Blechman and Michael Krepon, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1986), pp. 1-26, *Brochure on The U.S. NRRC: 1988–2002* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2002), and author’s interviews with NRRC Director Harold Kowalski, Jr. and NRRC staff (August 22, 2002).

¹⁰ Barry M. Blechman and Krepon, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers*, pp. 6–8.

2. To help institutionalize and foster proper implementation of unilateral, bilateral or multilateral measures for nuclear risk reduction, arms control, and/or force reduction in the region.
3. To build trust and confidence by providing data that could assist monitoring and compliance—as well as to nullify misperceptions.

The establishment of NRRCs between India and Pakistan could similarly be utilized to exchange official communications. They could also be used to prevent unintended escalation. The NRRCs would be used for advance notifications of strategic exercises and military training maneuvers. Though exchanging information on the exact location of their nuclear missiles or storage sites may not be in the security interest of the two countries, the NRRC could greatly aid in the implementation of future arms control and force reduction measures.

The existing hotline between the directors general of military operations (DGMOs), the heads of states, and other diplomatic channels of communication would continue to function as they have their own specific military, political, and diplomatic roles. The NRRCs, under a director general, senior diplomat or political figure with sufficient experience in handling security issues, directly appointed by the head of state, would coordinate with all relevant military, intelligence and diplomatic circles to perform its functions for the timely exchange of accurate information and notifications under various agreements. The NRRCs may thus become the nodal point for the coordinated exchange of information.

NRRCs in Pakistan and India could be used to send goodwill messages. They could also be utilized to help clarify and respond to questions of clarification of data provided. The NRRCs could become an appropriate official channel for the exchange of information during crises to alleviate concerns and prevent misunderstandings.

The governments of India and Pakistan would be expected to provide adequate resources for the operation of the NRRCs. The NRRCs executive would seek guidance and technical assistance from his government and intelligence agencies. He would also have direct communication and access to the foreign minister, the president, and prime minister.

Agreed procedural arrangements between the NRRCs could be particularly valuable during crises. The manning of the NRRCs, as well as intra- and inter-governmental coordination during crises could help. If the staffs of the respective NRRCs have developed good working relations during peacetime, they would be more likely to communicate effectively during crises. By exchanging preliminary information and assessments of mutual intentions and implementing procedural arrangements, the NRRCs may prove more successful than hotlines have in the past.

Troop movements, military exercises, and intelligence-gathering systems are means of sending important signals. However, it has been difficult to convey intended messages with precision, and some messages may be misinterpreted. The messages transmitted or conveyed may appear to be muted or overdrawn and could be entirely misinterpreted by the other side. The establishment of NRRCs could help rapid exchange of detailed and accurate messages. During periods of deep crisis, the NRRCs could collect information that would help to evaluate and analyze data and to assist political leaders in deciding to take a specific course of action.

Instantaneous means of communication among technical experts could be very useful during air and naval operations. The shooting of Pakistan's naval aircraft "Atlantic" by India and similar incidents could have been prevented if NRRCs were in place and if they were functioning properly. Exchanges between the NRRCs would be helpful following accidents.

The NRRCs would be staffed by a selective group of interagency experts and technically skilled personnel. The goal would be to train skilled interagency crisis prevention teams. The negotiations for establishing the NRRCs would include coordination procedures during periods of quiet and for crises. There should be regular meetings and consultations between the staffs of the NRRCs. The need for cooperation is particularly important for defusing potential crises involving nuclear terrorism. The interactions between the multidisciplinary NRRC staff would have great potential to handle situations the moment crises arise. Given a well developed understanding of each other's concerns, prior planning, analysis, and training to handle such incidents, NRRCs would not only help to defuse crises, but may also be a step forward towards cooperation for a joint action to fight nuclear terrorism.

The establishment of NRRCs would help clear the clouds of mistrust and reduce the chances of conflict and a crossing of the nuclear threshold. Trust and confidence could be built by consolidating notification measures of existing and future CBMs and NRRMs and by making these notifications legally binding. By creating an institutional framework for notifications, it would be easier to monitor compliance, especially if consultative mechanisms are established regarding obligations to notify the other side. Dispute and conflict resolution would become more likely, from a basis of increased trust and confidence. However, the establishment and successful functioning of the NRRCs depends upon concurrent measures taken for conflict resolution regarding the Kashmir dispute. But the process to negotiate, establish, or activate NRRCs should not be delayed until a resolution of the Kashmir issue, which could take considerable time given its own internal dynamics and complexity. However, positive measures taken to resolve the dispute through a sustained dialogue would serve as an impetus to operate the NRRCs effectively. In the absence of conflict resolution, NRRMs will fall short.

Risks and Apprehensions

The utility of establishing NRRCs between the United States and the Soviet Union was questioned by some analysts, as will be the creation of NRRCs between India and Pakistan. There were four principal concerns associated with NRRCs raised during the Cold War:

- The creation of centers could increase Soviet opportunities for spreading misleading information and deception leading up to and during crises;
- The centers could offer opportunities for the Soviets to gain important and sensitive intelligence information;
- By providing an additional channel of communication, the creation of the centers could lead to confusion and mixed signals;

- The creation of the centers could prompt concerns by allies, friends, or third parties that Washington and Moscow would discuss problems in which they had a stake without adequately considering their interests.¹¹

The first three arguments listed above are equally applicable to Indo-Pakistani relations.

- *An opponent's use of the NRRC for transmitting misleading, deceptive, or false information.* The NRRCs are designed to serve as a separate, additional channel of official communication among technical experts. They would follow agreed procedures and specific methods of exchanging notifications and information. In the prevailing security environment, the interest of both countries to resolve a particular crisis may well override their conflicting positions on larger disputes. In some situations, however, the NRRCs might be used to convey misleading or false information, further exacerbating tension in an already strained political environment. A decision to misuse this official channel for nuclear risk reduction would clarify the opponent's dubious intentions. The damage resulting from an opponent's misuse of the NRRC would be directly proportional to the intelligence and capabilities of the other side to identify false or misleading information. The staff of the NRRC could be trained to identify the disinformation techniques, allowing them to advise senior government officials and political leaders when the information received through the NRRC channel appears to be disingenuous or misleading. National intelligence agencies are also trained to identify misinformation. Thus, the staff of the NRRCs could add to such capabilities. With or without the NRRCs, there are no guarantees against providing misleading or false information. The establishment and proper staffing of NRRCs can help clarify the quality of information provided, while encouraging proper implementation of agreements reached.
- *Threat to national security.* The establishment of NRRCs in south Asia would not change nuclear deterrence or doctrine. Their creation would be designed to prevent misperceptions of intentions or unintended escalation. Further, there was no perceptible change in the nuclear strategies of the U.S. or Russia following the establishment of their NRRCs. Nor is there any evidence that the NRRCs in Washington and Moscow have revealed sensitive information. Likewise, authorities in India and Pakistan would have exclusive powers to decide which information the NRRC may communicate. The NRRCs would be staffed with a highly trained coterie of multidisciplinary personnel with considerable technical experience to handle the security and strategic environments of South Asia. Moreover, the information exchanged would be previously agreed upon and conveyed under a pre-formatted system. Intelligence agency officials may be asked to provide guidance as deemed necessary. The functioning of the NRRCs would therefore guard against unauthorized disclosure of potentially sensitive or damaging information.
- *The NRRCs may not prevent crises or nuclear terrorism.* True. But crises and acts of nuclear terrorism could also occur in the absence of NRRCs. If these events occur, the NRRCs could help avoid unintended escalation. The quick exchange of information in such situations

¹¹ *Ibid.*

could lead to cooperation on nuclear safety measures to prevent and control nuclear radiation that could result from an accident or as a result of an attack on a nuclear installation. Both India and Pakistan might be willing to cooperate in such situations, instead of acting in ways that could lead to conventional conflict and a crossing of the nuclear threshold. Non-government experts are already in the process of addressing this issue.¹²

Operational Issues

- Key staff members from both centers will meet once or twice a year to resolve problems and to seek improvements in the efficiency of the centers.
- The staff will not exchange any voice or telephone communications, because of the potential this mode of communication has for misperception. The centers shall exchange only written and preformatted notifications, the text and details of which shall be mutually decided and agreed upon by both countries during their meetings.
- “Goodwill” messages may be used only in cases of an emergency to prevent a potential crisis. No deviations will be accepted in this regard. The U.S. and Russia have exchanged only eleven “goodwill” messages in the last 14 years.
- Messages must be sent via preformatted and agreed upon templates. The multidisciplinary staff must use its skill to identify any anomalous notification and prevent its recurrence.
- The staff must always rapidly submit notification to their counterparts and effect prior coordination with various departments accordingly. In case of any delay or lapse, the notification should still be forwarded with regrets on the failure to retain trust and confidence in the institution.

It must be noted that the “NRRCs are not the panacea for crisis management” and should not become involved in substantive negotiations during crises. Crisis management is the job of trained diplomats and the burden will continue to fall on political leaders. The “NRRCs could compliment diplomatic channels during crises only when political authorities believe that technical exchanges about military activities could be useful supplements to the main diplomatic discourse.”¹³

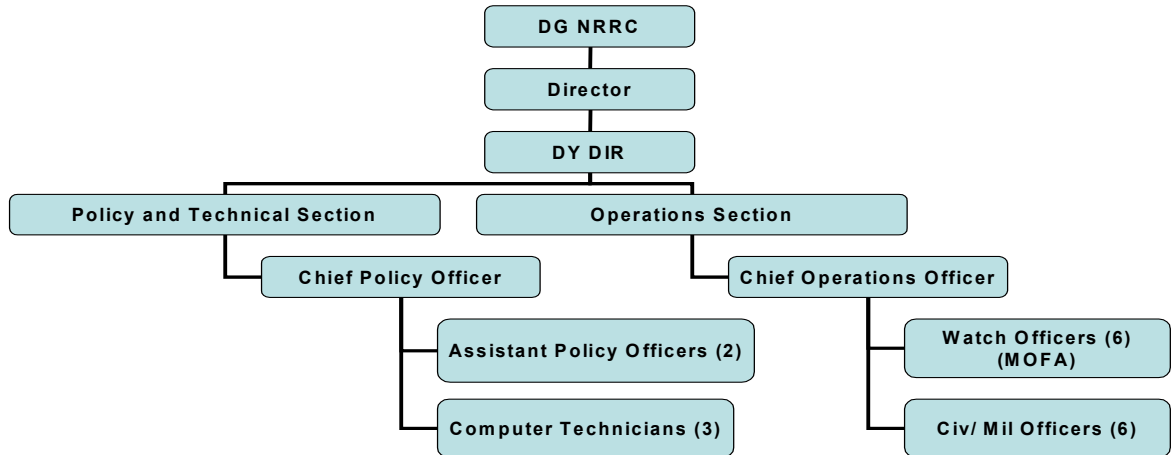
The nuclear risk reduction centers would be established in Islamabad and New Delhi and would remain open continuously. During any event with the potential to cause a nuclear crisis, they should be manned around the clock. These centers could be equipped with the latest computers and hotlines with high-speed data facsimile transmission links as agreed by the two governments. Duplicate devices should be installed to assure reliable technical means of communication, even when one system malfunctions. Both countries could acquire separate channels on the same or different satellites to further ensure redundancy. Ciphers would enhance the communication security between the two countries. A group of diplomatic, military, and intelligence personnel along with a few civil and technical experts would be required to work in the NRRC on both a temporary and permanent basis.

¹² Rajesh Basur and Hasan Askari Rizvi, “Nuclear Terrorism in South Asia” (Washington, DC: Presented at the Brookings Institution, September 13, 2002).

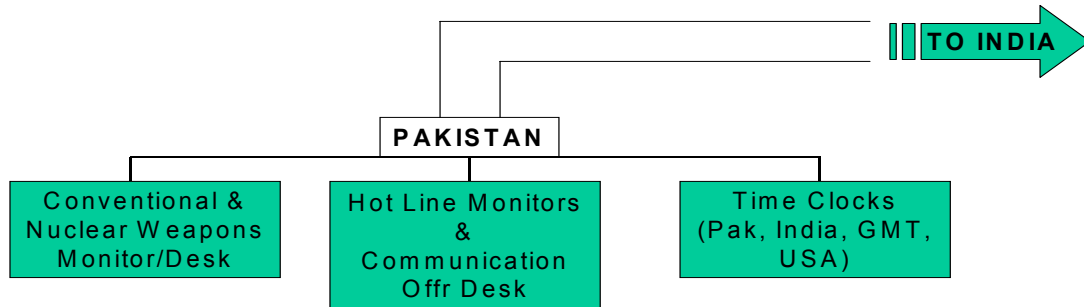
¹³ Blehman and Krepon, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers*, pp. 12–13.

The staff should operate under previously agreed upon instructions. The president or prime minister, as considered appropriate, may nominate the director general of the NRRC who would report to the president or prime minister's national security adviser or to the foreign minister. He could be a civilian with prior experience in security negotiations. The proposed organization for Pakistan's NRRC and a suggested diagram for its technical equipment are depicted below:

PAKISTAN's NRRC SUGGESTED ORGANISATION



PROPOSED COMMUNICATION & EQUIPMENT SECURITY DIAGRAM



- Double monitor and receiver systems for redundancy.
- Initially a single separate channel could be used by either country through one or two different commercial satellites as appropriate. However, for communication security, cyphers may need to be exchanged mutually to prevent interception by any other country.
- DG NRRC may have direct priority links with the following: -

-Secretary MOFA	- Secretary NSC/Security Advisor to President	- DG Operations (Army, Navy, AF)
-Secretary MOD	- DG SPD	- DG ISI

A group of inspectors or observers, consisting of technical personnel only, might be associated with the NRRCs. This group of inspectors or observers would provide a “verification element” of the notifications provided to the NRRCs, thereby building trust and confidence in the information exchanged. For example, if notifications of large-scale military exercises were sent through the NRRCs, inspectors or

observers could be sent to confirm the information provided. At least initially, observation might be confined to activities—such as large-scale military exercises—that do not involve nuclear forces. Observation and assistance to civil authorities during national emergencies could also be undertaken. Once the element of verification has gained acceptance and confidence has been built, the two sides could consider mutual observation of more sensitive activities. Detailed procedures for observation could be the subject of negotiations. The list of the visiting inspectors of the other country would be processed by the government and intelligence agencies to verify their credentials, including the pilots by the civil aviation authorities to accord the necessary clearances.

The NRRC staff may be required to perform a wide range of functions in peacetime as well as during periods of tension and crisis. Despite the development of standard operating procedures, the centers may not initially be able to perform all the functions of the U.S. and Russian NRRCs. Pakistan and India could begin modestly with task-oriented functions acceptable to the two governments. Once underway, additional functions could be worked out at a later date. The establishment of NRRCs would no doubt face certain hurdles, but through political will and concerted efforts they can be surmounted. Annual or semiannual meetings between the staff are essential to enhance the scope and functioning of the NRRCs. U.S. technical support and practical advice in this regard would be critical. U.S. NRRC officials and non-governmental experts were all optimistic about the merits of NRRCs for South Asia and were willing to render necessary assistance in the light of their experiences.¹⁴

Location of Pakistan's NRRC

Both the staff and inspection elements of the Russian NRRC are functioning quite smoothly in the Ministry of Defense. The U.S. debate on the issue in 1986 considered four locations: the NSC apparatus at the White House, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and a new setting separate from existing bureaucratic institutions.¹⁵ However, then-Secretary of State George Shultz's argument prevailed. He argued that since the new channel of communication was being created as an additional link between the two governments and that such communication is overseen by the State Department, the NRRC should function under the direct support and direction of the U.S. Department of State.¹⁶ The U.S. on-site inspection expertise, however, functions under the Pentagon. Bureaucratic hurdles and vested interests were reportedly cited as reasons for preventing their integration.

Pakistan could decide either to keep the NRRC under the principal secretary or national security adviser to the president or prime minister or under the foreign minister. The General Headquarters has its own hotline channel and reports to the Ministry of Defense. Therefore, the NRRC could work as a separate channel exclusively under civilian control. Military-related information and notification could be sent to NRRCs by routing through their official channels and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or External Affairs as applicable to both countries.

¹⁴ Interview with U.S. NRRC Director Harold Kowalski, Jr., August 22, 2002.

¹⁵ Blechman and Krepon, *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers*, pp. 22–25.

¹⁶ Interviews with NRRC director and staff, August 22, 2002.

CONCLUSION

The proposal for creating NRRCs could help the security environment in South Asia. The creation of NRRCs needs to be an agenda item for dialogue between Pakistan and India. NRRCs should be negotiated and properly implemented promptly without waiting for the outcome of the Kashmir dispute. The NRRCs would help to consolidate and enhance the scope of current CBMs and NRRMs between the two countries. The monitoring of certain notifications could facilitate trust and conflict resolution.